

Spring 1986

## PenQuest Volume 5, Number 1

Shatney

Jane O'Neal

Mark McBride

Nature Johnston

Julie Crowell

*See next page for additional authors*

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**Authors**

Shatney, Jane O'Neal, Mark McBride, Nature Johnston, Julie Crowell, Anne Benjamin, William Slaughter, Kate Mathews, Kathleen O'Brien, Katharine Rodier, Jonathan Williams, Mark Sablow, Kevin Christenson, Latrell Mickler, Mark Grisham, and Lori Kirsbaum

# *Perquest*



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# Penquest



Volume V, Number 1

Spring 1986

*Editors*

MARK MCBRIDE

DEBORAH SHATNEY

KATHLEEN O'BRIEN

*Literary Advisor*

WILLIAM SLAUGHTER

*Graphics Advisor*

DAVID PORTER

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*Penquest*  
Language and Literature Department  
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# Penquest

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## *Success*

I USED TO be a successful real estate agent. But then I went into this slump. It was right after we moved to Montgomery County. What happened was that I developed this attitude problem. I don't really know how to describe it. Here, let me give you an example:

First of all, I had this image that I was really chic. It was crazy because the whole image centered around these high-heeled boots I bought. You see I was about ten or twenty pounds overweight — ten pounds if I have a large frame, which I think I do but am not sure of, and twenty pounds if you went by the way I looked. Well anyway, when I put on these boots I looked thin, or at least sort of straight up and down. And I dressed accordingly, a lot of straight skirts and blouses cinched at the waist.

This one night I had floor duty, meaning I sat at the office answering the phones hoping to get a client, and I got a call to list a property. I rushed off to the bathroom and tried to get a look at myself in the little mirror over the sink. Of course I could only see my face, but I imagined the rest of me looked great. What I didn't know was that sometime during the evening, probably while I was eating my Italian sub with extra oil, I got this smudge of oil on my blouse right at the end of my left breast. I'm sure it made me look ridiculous, but as I left the office I had no idea and thought I'd knock them dead.

I buzzed down the street in my Jaguar, the sedan type, not the XKE, feeling like I could take on the world. This was my first appointment in Montgomery County and I was going to show them how it was done. I was sure by the next sales meeting I could boast about this listing and more. I was on my way.



As soon as I entered the door and took off my coat, both the husband and wife were staring at my boob. Then I noticed the smudge. I no longer felt chic, but even more importantly, I was now irritated at this couple like it was their fault. I said nothing about it — I mean what could I say that wouldn't have been even more embarrassing?

I tried to pretend that the smudge didn't exist. "Lovely home, lovely home. Let's get these rooms measured and sit down and talk about a fair price." I really was quite thrilled; this house could go for at least \$150,000 making my commission about \$2600 or double if I could sell it myself.

They were pleased with the price I suggested and seemed to like my presentation — I was good with figures and contracts. Then it happened: my attitude problem surfaced.

The wife turned to me and looked over both her shoulders and whispered, "The important thing is that we do not want to sell our house to colored people. Do you understand?"

Now I had been dealing with people for eight years; this kind of comment was not a surprise to me. I usually said something like, "I can sympathize, but of course it is against the law, and we don't want to break any laws do we?" This didn't bother me because I never minded taking \$3000 from a couple of bigots. But they were staring at my left boob — and I was sick of being nice to people.

So I leaned really close to these people and whispered, "No ma'am, I don't understand."

They added, continuing the whispering, "It's not that we're prejudiced, but we don't want to make the neighbors mad. We've been living here a long time. And you know how one black family can upset the whole neighborhood."

Then I did it. I put my head down close to the table and whispered real low, "Yes ma'am, I do know. Boy, when we moved into our neighborhood most of the houses were soon on the market. You see, my husband's black."

I lied. My husband is not black, but this was really fun watching them squirm. Actually, I do this quite often, telling people my husband's black or that I'm a lesbian or whatever can make people squirm. You should try it; it's fun, but it won't get you many friends, or a listing.

Well, they decided to think about it and I decided to do something about my attitude. It wasn't a big decision because I'd

been considering it for days every time I passed the little red brick house with the sign out front reading: "Dr. Falwell, Hypnotist."

Well I was pretty nervous as I descended the dark narrow basement stairs in my high heeled boots. The little waiting room was small: I mean small. Sitting with my knees against the wall, I remembered what really spurred my interest in hypnosis.

Five, maybe six years before, I was sitting in a doctor's office with a friend. She needed a ride. Her son had an ear infection. He always had an ear infection. But anyway, I was sitting there and this guy from high school, who I had not seen for ten years, walked out. He had a smile on his face from ear to ear and the sad part was his teeth had gone bad. All I could think of was how people say it is a shame when someone doesn't keep up with their education or musical talents, and so on, but I thought what a real shame it is when people don't keep up their teeth. But it didn't seem to bother him; he just looked at me with this shit-eating grin and said, "Man, it's just like being stoned."

"Jerry, what are you talking about?"

"Man, I've just been hypnotized to quit smoking and it's better than grass!"

Well ever since that day, I wanted to experience this.

Now, I wasn't so sure. Dr. Falwell opened a little window and called me into an equally small office. I wish you could have seen this man, because I can't do him justice. I'd say he was about fifty. He had a pencil-thin mustache, a black toupee, and some sort of black dye on the remainder of his own hair. He was sweating and it was running. And he seemed to have some pinkish colored make-up on. He began by giving me this schpiel about being a medical doctor, which I knew he wasn't.

Then the weirdest thing happened. As I stared at his little mustache moving up and down with his lip, I started to feel really heady — I mean I was floating. I was feeling good until this weird man had the nerve to lean across the table and ask me, "And what would you like to accomplish here today? What suggestions shall I make while you're under?"

His questions brought me back. I had to answer. "I need some motivation. I need to concentrate on selling real estate success-



fully. And if you could add something, I also need to lose some weight."

"Oh, that's fine. Those suggestions work real good. You'll really be pleased," he smiled and his mustache arched upward.

He led me into the back where surrounded by a curtain was a medical-type examining table. It was dark so he had to lead me by the elbow.

"Lie down. The important thing is to relax. Now I'm going to turn on the vacuum cleaner. I find the monotonous noise helps to relax people." He began to move his fingers over my head similar to the way a child does when trying to make you feel like an egg has just been broken on your head.

"Your eyes are heavy." He moved his fingers over my lids, then down my cheeks and neck to my shoulders. "You will not be able to move any part of your body that I touch."

His fingers traveled down my arms and across my fingers. "You will not be able to touch food without feeling guilty." His fingers conspicuously skipped the trunk of my body and went down my legs.

"When you eat it will be because you are truly hungry." Now, his fingers traveled up my legs.

"Your real estate career is really important to you. You will pursue it everyday aiming for success."

His finger leaped from my legs back to my hands.

"You will not eat unless you are truly hungry!" Now he was yelling like Oral Roberts. Up to the top of my head and his fingers stopped. I was disappointed. It felt great.

Then he seemed to move behind the curtain, but I didn't want to open my eyes in case he was staring at me.

Now you're not going to believe this; it is so awful, but I could hear change rattling in his pocket. He was taking off his pants! I couldn't open my eyes. I just pictured this freak with pink make-up and shoe polish on his hair standing with his pants around his ankles trying to get an erection while he yelled out.

"YOU WILL SUCCEED." He was breathing and panting and screaming, "YOU WILL SUCCEED." His pace trailed off like a train halting, "SUCCESS . . . Success . . . success." I could smell the distinct odor of semen.

I felt so relieved. I knew he would not touch me now. I felt so relaxed I didn't think I'd be able to walk out to my car.



Then he flicked on the light and I opened my eyes to find his face right over me, smiling. "That's fifty dollars."

I really had a hard time making it up those narrow stairs in my boots and decided to sit down and take them off before I climbed any further. Funny, I never have put those boots back on. All I could think of was how stupid I was to pay fifty dollars to have some jerk make me pay for his pleasure.

Coming up the dark stairway into the noonday sun made me realize just how stupid I had been. On the way back to the office I passed a McDonald's and a KFC, but I wasn't hungry. I just wanted to get back to the office and prove to myself that I could put all this behind me. As soon as I got to my desk I phoned my clients and told them that I thought there must be some way to keep black people from buying their home.

# Julie Crowell

---

## *Corporate America*

Play the social games  
Pygmalion  
Dress for Success  
you are what you wear  
or, like the new car commercials,  
you are what you drive.

Climbing, climbing  
the wealthy wear beige raincoats  
and Reagan made brown an acceptable color this year.  
Socio-economic nepotism  
and follow-the-leader.

Blue and gray suits  
white shirts  
Women, hold books on your head  
you can be Mother Superiors,  
and image counts when other things are equal.

We are products of our environment,  
thank you John Molloy.

# Nature Johnston

---

## *Pete's Cafe*

Entering sanctuary, a pair of eyes  
must pause at the door to adjust.  
Pete's mean about letting in light  
    though some finds its way in  
    becoming dirty through the stained glass.  
Illumination is provided by Bud Light and Miller Time.

Arthritic wood moans under foot of a weighted customer  
    whose silhouette was altered over the years  
    by communion with Pete.

Bread and Wine

Beer and Sandwich

Pete doesn't talk much to those in attendance  
    and they respond in kind.

Even the neon tries to keep its hum to itself.

A ceiling fan paddles soundless overhead  
    more to keep the smoke stirred

    than to provide cooling, failing at its life's mission.  
The paddle fan fits right in.

REAL country and western  
with sawdust in it

and the smell of horses

and Coke in a 6 oz bottle icy at the top  
twangs from a portable AM radio  
somewhere out of sight.

A choir

    of women bleating for their cheatin' man. The crowd  
at Pete's cafe stirs found out.

The air in Pete's place is over used. It's been breathed too  
many times. Never changing year in, year out  
just like Pete.

He stands behind the altar with one foot propped on  
a bar stool, a wet toothpick working his teeth.

You wanna sandwich? Yeah.

Anyone can buy a sandwich  
Anyone can buy a beer  
But only the Elect abide.

# Anne Benjamin

---

## *Geranium Talk*

Red, red-oranged clusters  
In rose, white, rust boxes

Beckoning:  
Come. Confide.  
Remembering:  
My Yetta, My Joseph,  
My Grandma, My Grandpa,  
Past people  
Mourned people  
Withered brown brilliances  
With earth covered faces  
Melting to new depths  
To earth new blooms.

Renewing:  
Geranium Talk  
Come. Confide.





*Untitled.* Photograph, Mark Sablow.

# William Slaughter

---

## *The Man Who Buried His Books*

knew Latin.  
He really liked  
feminine endings,  
how his mouth  
tasted them,

as Catullus  
tasted Lesbia.  
But his enemy,  
whose name  
was Gravity,

defeated him.  
He did not settle  
down readily.  
'Only one life  
to live'

he said.  
'Such poverty'  
And he kept on  
reading . . .  
When he was

done with them,  
he wrapped

his books up  
(without ceremony)  
and buried them.

He wanted more  
than one woman.  
The earth  
remains, scarred  
from his digging.

from *Crosscurrents*



# Jane O'Neal

---

## *Maria*

THE GYPSY DANCER moved and swayed her sensuous hips and my husband fingered his belt. She looked at no man and yet at every man, making her eyes flicker over each face briefly, then moving on. Once, as she arched her back and swung her hair in the dance, the edge of her skirt touched the fire and caught flame. A young vaquero jumped to douse the fire with his cup of cerveza, but soon she doused his hopes, also, and drifted away to the other side of the campfire, still twisting and turning to the sound of her lover's guitar. I wondered whether she wanted to burn the opposite side of her skirt to match, so maybe my husband would jump to douse and be doused.

How could I think she was a threat to *me*? Today as we led our horses down through the mountain pass, she alone walked, barefoot as she was now, beside her lover's horse as was the custom with these Mexicans. They treated their women like the rich brown dirt they farmed beneath the adobe sky in the Spring. I could never have done it — walked like she did for so many miles — but then my Carl would never have expected it. American women are a treasure and a curiosity south of the Rio Grande.

Like every other Mexican woman I've ever known, her name was Maria. But I saw nothing about her even vaguely resembling the Virgin Mary, except maybe the devotion she showed to this one man. As she walked today, Maria's eyes always remained on the lean, strong line of his leg, connecting his body with the stirrup.

Today in the sun her skin was a rusty, burnished brown and her hair was tangled and knotted about her shoulders. But now, in the firelight, of course she was beautiful — beautiful

even in another woman's eyes. She was beautiful in my husband's eyes, too. His gaze flipped back and forth from her deep rich hair to her undulating waistline. Doesn't she ever tire? I thought. I guess those women never do.

I felt cramped, so I rose from the blanket on which I was seated and drifted toward a cluster of trees behind the wagons. I could still hear the frantic strains of the guitarist and now the men were beginning to clap their hands and shout and whistle for the enchanting Maria. But not all of the men, for one had followed me. The young vaquero who had been doused earlier had apparently lost interest in her also. I turned and he approached me. He was long and lean like so many of his kin, and wore his rough shirt open at the neck, but the fine lines of his face were more sensitive, his eyes less bold. He smiled and spoke to me.

"The American lady is not familiar with the ways of the Mex-gypsy women, no? Your eyes across the firelight tell the truth every time your man watches Maria turn. Do not blame him, for it is the dance which stirs his head, not Maria. Our dancing to the songs of our people means many things. Tonight we rejoice at the end of a long day. The American lady is very beautiful. Will you not release yourself and dance with me?"

Dance to this wild music, with no one to watch but each other — Yes! It seemed only fitting. He was already leading me to a clearing in the trees; then he began to sway and snap his fingers across his chest. So I kicked off my sandals and tore out what was left of my hairpins and joined him. Back-to-back, I countered his every movement and learned the dance by doing, by imitating what the feminine motions must look like. The music became louder, perhaps only in my head, and more violent, and still I let its beat become a part of me, until I was the one twisting and turning, while I closed my eyes and rocked with it. Then he turned toward me and I perceived admiration and not flirtation in his eyes and smile. Now I understood, and when we finally reached for a tree for support he said, "You were so beautiful, Maria."

# William Slaughter

---

## *Erasures*

1.

At my own birthing  
I am the one  
not there,  
the Absent One.

My mother  
and her doctor,  
Dr.\_\_\_\_\_,  
are sterile

and bereft.  
Who, together,  
have reproduced  
air . . .

I am  
in the *real* world  
elsewhere,  
less than pure.

2.

Having spoken,  
as wife,  
her first words  
— and last? —

she beds  
herself down.  
She awaits  
my long coming.

*I'd a whole  
lot rather . . .  
You didn't  
get my letter?*

She didn't . . .  
wear me well.  
Was always naked  
underneath.

3.

Death  
is my familiar.  
We worry  
each other.

I am lying now.  
I am being  
watched now.  
Mother, wife,

other . . . fictions  
to me, all.  
I occupy space  
elsewhere.

Bury me  
in an empty  
coffin. *Air.*  
The Absent One.



## *Mind You*

A woman's mind is made of lists:

buy bananas

deposit paycheck

fold socks

sterilize baby bottles

make beds

water philodendron

clean hall closet;

yet, like an overfull closet

things sometimes

fall

out.

A man says,

"How could you have forgotten  
to water the philodendron?"

A man says,

"It's such a small thing.

It only takes a few minutes."

A woman's life is made of small things.

A woman's life is made of few minutes.

*Morning I*

Cold windowpane against  
my forehead  
Fiery thoughts

The sun creeps through  
wisteria  
Purple  
night dreams  
not yet dead

The truth comes now  
in nightly installments  
death death  
of a young girl  
leaving only me

The sun's spotlight  
turns on me  
I perform but not  
the play I wrote

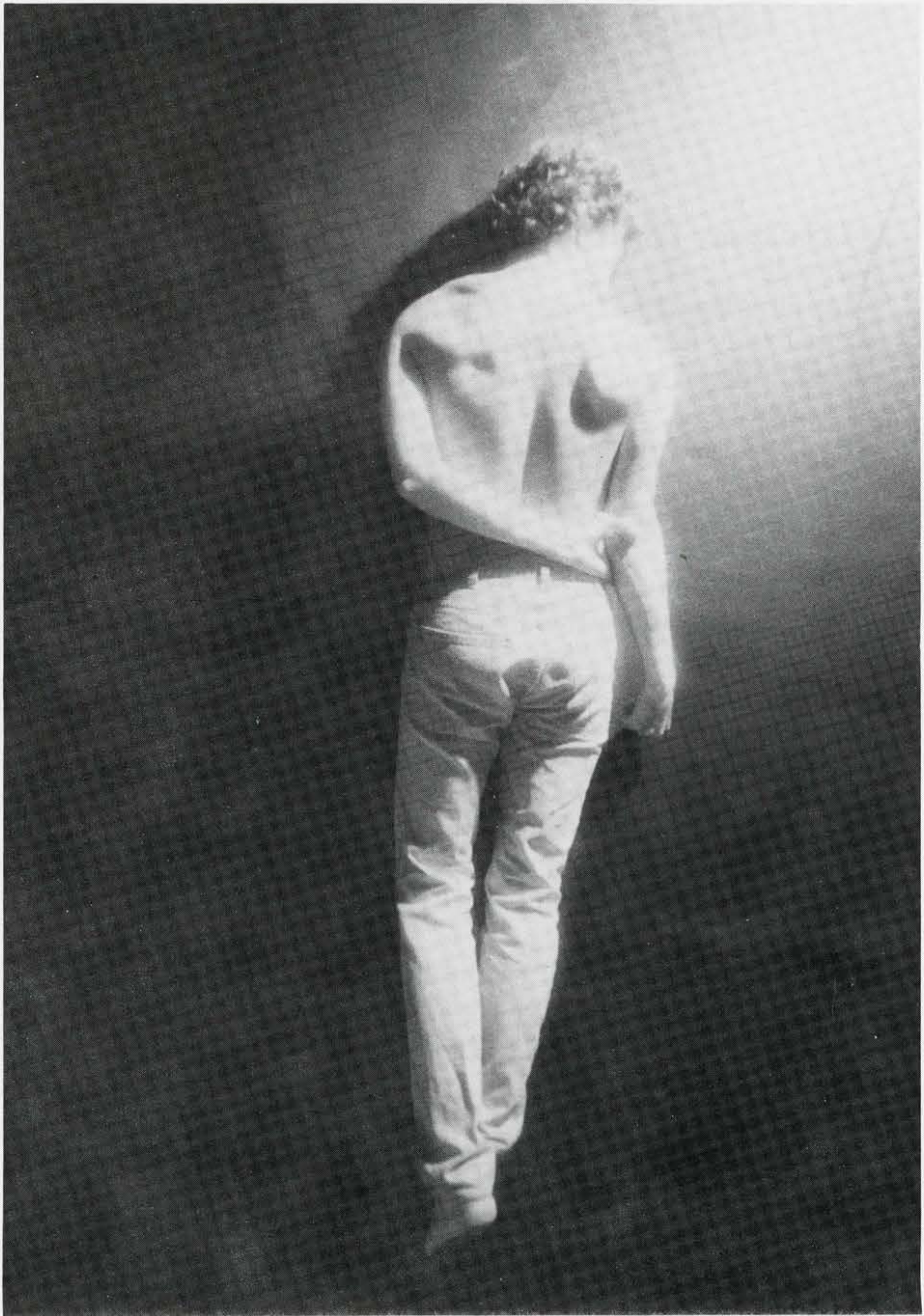
This is some slick  
farce  
bare of levels  
The surface  
is the thing

It is time to quit  
this window  
and drink my coffee

*Thoughts Upon Knowing Better*

I could say I'm a Basque flamenco dancer  
in exile  
tapping the time away  
until they let my people go.  
I could say I'm an Industrial Spy  
inognito  
stealing your post-industrial secrets  
for the Eastern Bloc brotherhood.  
I could say I'm a Best-Selling Author  
in the money  
telling you how to rub out cellulite,  
wrinkles, enemies, the I.R.S.  
But I won't.

Listen, what I do is this:  
I stroke the back of a sixteen-year-old girl  
in tears  
moving north isn't the end of love  
and snow isn't so bad once you've learned to ski.  
I listen to a young man, newly gay  
in transition  
leaving the mainstream is lonely  
and exploration of his stream's uncharted.  
I let thoughts form themselves  
insecure  
cutting teeth on Adrienne Rich is tough  
and learning to crawl through Faulkner is better  
than a walk through Harold Robbins.  
I wage a silent, holy war on Hallmark  
intrepid  
knowing Dynasty plots and Jordache jeans wear thin;  
that to you my worth matches the poverty of our souls.



*Artificial Portrait.* Photograph, Kevin Christenson.



## *Intrusions*

DAVID MCLEARY has been wanting to cut down the pine tree in his back yard for a month now. He told his wife that it was too close to the house, that the limbs might fall through the roof if a big wind came. When David woke this morning, at five-thirty, he decided today was the day the tree had to come down.

David always woke early before the rest of his family. He would go outside and get the paper, then set the water on the stove to boil for his coffee. In the headlines this morning there was a story about a man who had murdered his wife and three children and then turned the gun on himself. The photograph showed the man's house and a line of onlookers standing outside the ropes. David stared at the picture, then turned to the sports section.

In the back of the house David heard the baby. The frustrated cry sifted through the still air like a cat's call. David knew that his wife Ann would get the child. She always did. Besides, it was Sunday, and everybody would be up soon to get ready for church.

Ann walked into the living room with the baby in her arms. She smiled and David noticed the rings under her eyes. She sat down on the sofa to nurse the baby without saying anything. The child pulled at the ringlets of her blonde hair and she closed her eyes. The morning was still quiet.

At seven o'clock Sadie came running out of her bedroom with her blanket. She hurled herself onto Ann like a sack of wet rags. "Don't jump on Mama so hard, Sadie. It hurts," Ann told the little girl. Sadie climbed on the couch and leaned against her mother, then covered herself with her blanket.

David was outside preparing to cut the tree down. It was a nice looking pine tree, about twenty years old. It shot high above the house and when David looked up at it, and saw the clouds pass by above, he felt dizzy. He looked back down at the lower branches and the base of the tree and then at the house.

When Jimmy came out of his bedroom with his underwear on, his eyes were still matted with sleep. He walked over to the television and turned the cartoons on. He saw his mother in the kitchen cooking breakfast. He watched her make faces at the baby as she stirred the pancake mix. The baby sat in the high chair, playing with a slice of orange. He *oohed* and *aahed*.

Sadie was back in her bedroom looking for her yellow dress. Balancing on a chair, she pulled the dress out of the closet, knocking a few of her other clothes to the floor. Then she ran into the kitchen. "Mom, is it all right if I wear my yellow dress?"

"Yes. And your blue shoes," Ann said.

Sadie ran back to her bedroom and the sound of the chain saw came blaring into the kitchen. Ann thought the noise was obnoxious. She gave a pained look and turned the pancakes as smoke rose from the frying pan. She tried to concentrate on the cooking. She watched the butter turn brown around the edge of the pan and felt the heat rise from the stove. She looked at the clock and took a deep breath. Then the chain saw stopped and David went into the garage.

They were all sitting around the table and Jimmy was telling them about a song that he had heard at school. Then he started singing it and drumming his hands on the table.

"That's not necessary, Jimmy. It's too loud," David said.

After breakfast David went back outside to work on the pine tree and Ann washed the dishes while the kids finished dressing. "Mom, do I have to wear those pants?" Jimmy asked. He was at the age where the least alteration of his appearance was very frustrating to him. He particularly had a fetish for shoes. They were either too tight, too big, or the wrong color.

"Yes, Jimmy, and I want you to wear your red pull-over too."

"But, Mom, those pants are too short on my legs."

"Jimmy, I don't want to hear it."

"But, Mom," Jimmy whimpered, "everybody will think I'm strange. They'll call me high-waters."

"Jimmy's got high-waters on," Sadie mocked.



"Sadie, you be quiet."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Jimmy was under the coffee table now crying. He resembled an unborn child scrunched together, knees high, head tucked.

"Do you want me to get the belt?" Ann asked.

Jimmy crawled out from under the table, resuming human characteristics as he did. He walked to his bedroom mumbling with his head down.

The sound of the chain saw went grinding into the tree and Ann went into her bedroom, shutting the door behind her. She opened her closet and took out the light blue blouse she had bought at the beginning of the summer. It had small yellow flowers printed all over it. They reminded her of wild flowers along the highway and the time she and David drove cross-country on their honeymoon. They were twenty then and they took the entire summer to see the country.

David opened the bedroom door while Ann slipped a stocking on her raised leg. He looked at her and smiled, then reached into the drawer for his underwear and headed for the bathroom. It was nine-thirty and they had twenty minutes before they had to leave for church. The kids were watching cartoons and the baby was in the swing watching everything.

After Ann dressed, she took her Bible from the night stand and lay back on the bed and began to read. The more she read the quieter the house became.

"I think we should go camping this summer," Ann said to David, sitting on the bed, watching him dress.

"I'm going to have that tree down by this afternoon if I can get Sam to help me," David said as he looped his tie.

He did it gracefully.

Ann watched her husband as if she had never seen him before. She looked at his profile and thought of how he had changed into a man.

"Did you know, that if we are eternal beings, and time is everlasting, then now is forever. It's always now in eternity," Ann said, studying the lines of his face.

David turned from the mirror and leaned over and kissed his wife. "That's why I married you, Ann. You're so deep."

In the car, on the way to church, Jimmy sang quietly in the backseat and Sadie made funny eyes at the baby. Along the way they saw a wreck on Third Street. A man was lying on the

ground unconscious and a rescue unit was pulling up to the scene.

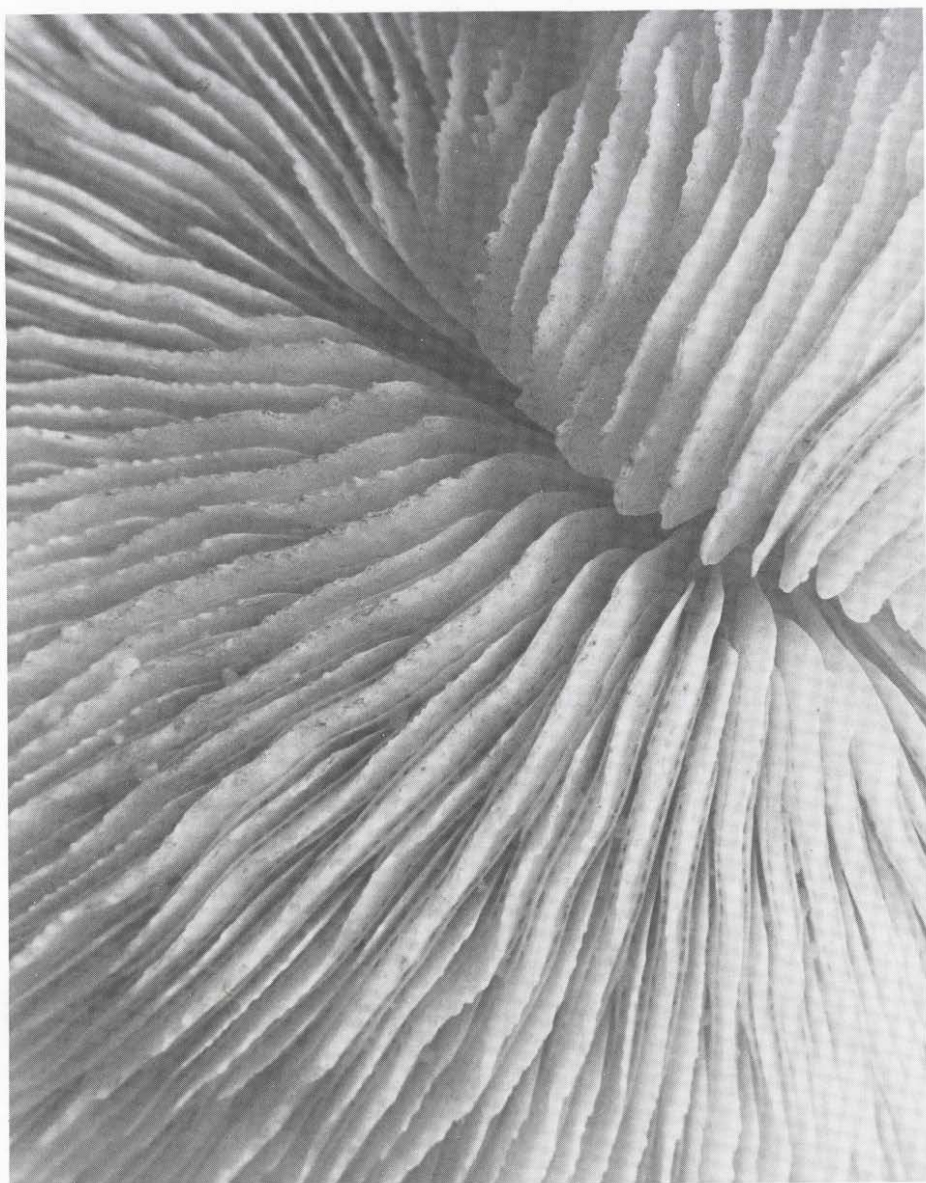
"Wow! Is he dead?" Jimmy asked.

"I don't think so," David said.

"I think we should pray for him," Ann said.

"All right," David said. "Father, have mercy on that man . . . and heal his body. Amen."

"Amen," shouted the kids, then Ann.



*Untitled.* Photograph, Latrell Mickler.



# Kathleen O'Brien

---

## *Coffee in the Tea Room*

*To the women who aren't in my life.*

Robed shadows move  
with firm intent.  
Breakfast lines of beads  
and hems  
whispering  
in reticent light.  
Expecting a  
"Hush . . ."  
I stir strong coffee,  
gently,  
and remember  
navy-blue girls  
at Daily Mass  
consecrated  
to Immaculate Conception.

I have no quarrel with this dim silence —  
not coming to, but from, long night's work  
in steam and greasy air.  
Harsh lights' truth and drunks'  
abuse as I pour and serve. Reserve  
my smiles; offer  
and take away,  
then pray for more  
than dimes.

But friends have moved as Time  
has marked its pace and none remain  
to wash away the past night's pain.

No subtle morning words:  
now silence, alone,  
for comfort.

A marked woman, searching  
I rest here. But only shadows come  
and go, and younger women  
. . . not yet tired enough to show  
that a good fuck is not  
enough and they don't understand.  
My cup is almost empty  
and a new sign reads:

COFFEE 15¢

NO REFILLS!

# Katharine Rodier

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## *The Children*

The children file into the hall, kneel  
and fold, hands over heads, heads  
to the wall. The teacher tells them  
it's long enough. At home, their parents talk  
about a bay full of pigs. At night,  
the children wait in the dark; the pigs  
swim ashore. Bigger than barns, they thunder  
up streets. Huge hooves smash holes in roofs,  
hairy snouts shove through rooms. The children  
crouch beside their beds, listening  
as pigs crunch the bottles  
of water, the cans in the pantry.  
They wait and wonder how long this time.

from *The New Virginia Review*





*Untitled.* Photograph, Kevin Christenson.

# Kathleen O'Brien

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## *Sisters, Reclamation, or Not Wanting To Say, "I Told You So," But . . .*

*Dedicated to "Mike" and her visit*

Oak and pine,  
mahogany,  
wicker, copper  
and pottery

frame this life  
and weight it —  
stable and secure.

Handsome things and old,  
homemade things — not sold,  
full of love and work  
and earth.

And you will say  
This is great!  
and mean it,  
but you should have seen it  
ten years back —  
before you danced in California  
and called yourself Nevada,

ten years back —  
when I lived to dance  
and slept with drummers  
and drugs and frantic  
dreams of peace  
and love and work  
and earth,

ten years back —  
before the man who said  
    Don't sleep around  
    or dream with anyone else  
    but me.

Hope you really think it's great  
as I do.

'Cause I want you —  
    strong as oak,  
    soft as pine,  
    with mahogany child  
    to claim your time —

I want you to find content  
and rest and recognize  
the things inside  
that frame and weight  
and stabilize,

the dreams of sleep  
and peace,  
of love and work  
and earth.

I do.

## *Genetics*

*To Chip, of course, with  
thanks to Shawn for  
surrendering the image.*

Born of common ground:  
the same space of different years,  
growing close with miles between.  
By the time our cores, our trunks,  
are close enough to touch,  
our roots have sunk,  
each group, deep  
into the native soils of South and North,  
of male and female,  
of different growings-up.  
But meet we do and touch;  
we rub each other long enough  
to wear away the bark  
and grow together  
in that place where  
heart to heart we graft:  
two trees now grown as one.

Still  
from our separate roots  
we're fed  
and fight the odds  
to rise as one, to grow  
to our full height —  
each pushing, leaning,  
yearning against the other  
with nowhere to go but  
towards the light.



And now that we are double-trunked  
what once seemed sure, so strong,  
begins to feel like pulp  
shored-up by new grown bark —  
a ring for each new child,  
as if they knew to bring  
that extra wrap  
to bind, to hold  
the parent trunk  
as lengthening branches  
begin to reach for different suns,  
and feel the deeper springs  
feed separate roots,  
then mingle only for the rise  
and split, again, to sympathize  
each in its own direction.

The coat of bark  
the children make  
grows thinnest  
at the cleavage.



*Galvanistic Ascension.* Photograph, Mark E. Grisham.

### *The Mystery of the Back Porch Light*

WE HAD GONE to bed early that night. Seldom did we hit the sheets until after one or two a.m., but here it was ten and already we were in the sack, probably owing to the wine we drank with dinner. We planned to read for awhile but I had just turned off my bedside lamp and snuggled under the covers and Victor wasn't long in following my lead.

The night was dark and still, even at that early hour, a perfect night to try this bold experiment. We were almost giddy with pleasure, in fact, too excited and full of ourselves to relax and fall asleep. It had long been our goal to go to bed by nine-thirty or ten o'clock and thereby to get up at daybreak. But being poorly disciplined and far too interested in the late-night fare on television, we had gotten into the bad habit of staying up much of the night and sleeping most of the morning.

Television wasn't our only diversion. We were prone to working late into the night, Victor being the owner of a small marketing company. Sometimes I would drive to his office in the evenings and help with the books. Afterwards, we'd have a late dinner somewhere and on weekends take in a movie or a game of putt-putt.

But this night was different. All those desperate late-morning promises ("Tonight we WILL go to bed early") were about to be realized. Such simpletons we are, I thought, to be so pleased with ourselves for such a minor accomplishment. The thought was a comforting one, in its own self-deprecating way, and I began to relax for a good night's sleep.

My eyes were still open as I lay in bed relaxing, waiting for sleep to overtake me. I could see barely the hint of furniture in the room, there being so little light. But all of a sudden, the



room was bathed in light. It came through the curtains and shades from outside, and immediately I recognized it as a flood light from our neighbors to the rear.

I was unaware of their use of exterior lights since all the world was dark by the time Victor and I usually went to bed. But I assumed the Martins seldom used their floods. They were miserly with light and occasionally commented on what they considered our extravagant use of electricity. Victor and I would leave two or three of our most powerful floods on whenever we were away from the house, which, given our work habits, was quite often. And these lights would not be extinguished until we arrived back home, usually in the wee hours. The light now filling our bedroom and distracting us from sleep was from our neighbor's back porch, and I wondered why they had just turned it on.

Actually my first reaction was one of annoyance. "Imagine that," I whispered to Victor, there being no reason to fill the room with my voice just as the Martin's flood filled our room with light. He mumbled incoherently in reply, apparently not wanting to align himself with me against the Martins, or for them and against me. But I could tell he too was annoyed.

"Imagine that," I repeated to myself. I just bet the Martins knew we were in bed, trying to fall asleep. After all, their living room afforded quite a view of our living room and it would have been obvious our television was off, as were all our interior lights. Most telling, our exterior lights were off as well, meaning only that we were home and, given the lack of activity, in bed. I just bet they were well aware of the distraction their light caused. There was no mistaking it. I've called it a flood light; no, it was more like a klieg. It must have lit up the entire block. It was almost as if they had turned on that back klieg for no reason whatsoever, except to annoy us.

I could imagine the conversation between them, Herb and Barbara. I could see them scheming, rubbing their hands together like greedy stock brokers. "We'll wait until that first night the Cominskys want to go to bed early. We'll give them enough time to get drowsy, then we'll turn on the back light. It'll keep them up for hours, just as their lights have bothered us now for months."

Imagine the treachery! My good friend Babs. Good friend nothing. To think I had recently cared for their mangy cat



while they were on vacation in Aruba. The five of them: Herb, Babs, and their three children cavorting in the Caribbean for ten days while I dutifully dispensed the cat food smelling of tuna. I was livid now, all pretense of sleep gone. Victor languished beside me. How he could sleep within the glare of that klieg light and as the object of a hurtful conspiracy, I couldn't know.

I resolved to go over to the Martin's. It was still early, about ten-twenty. I would confront them. I would ask, "Why didn't you tell us? We never knew our flood lights were bothering you. A simple indication, that's all I need, just a simple indication we're bothering you. I'm a sensitive person, none of this 'It's my property and I'll do what I want' crap. I would have gladly turned off the floods if they were bothering you."

I was up now. Blue jeans and a T-shirt. No bra. Just be casual, nothing formal. Try to save the relationship, I coached myself. Mild confrontation. No screaming.

No screaming? What was I thinking? This was Barbara Martin my friend. She would never conspire to hurt me and Victor. They weren't our best friends, but their decency and congeniality had always impressed me. God-fearing Americans with three children in private schools. She served turkey at Thanksgiving and Christmas. Vic and Herb played the occasional round of golf, and the family even bought \$27 worth of soap from me when I went through my Amway phase.

No, I reasoned, sitting now at the foot of my side of the bed, so not to disturb Vic. He was snoring with a wide beam of klieg light laying across his middle like a sheet of paneling. My good friends the Martins would not behave like this. No. If they had a beef with our floods, they would have approached us, like mature adults, and simply explained that our lights kept them up at night. They were such decent folk; in fact, they probably would have suffered in silence, not wanting to jeopardize the relationship. Or, more than likely, Herb and Barbara were like Vic, able to sleep soundly in the midst of the brightest flood light.

I began to feel ashamed of myself. How could I think such horrible things of my friends? Decent neighbors like the Martins are hard to come by, and I value their friendship. I was far from sleep now, and put out with myself, so I decided a snack was in order. Still dressed in my blue jeans and T-shirt, I tiptoed to the kitchen for some hot tea and toast.

Filling the tea kettle at my sink, I noticed the Martin's back porch light through my kitchen window. Odd, it was still on. The Martins almost never used that light. I was sure of that now. I had wondered earlier whether they used their exterior floods, but now I was certain, standing at my kitchen window, that I had never seen that particular light on before.

I stood transfixed. Why would that light be on? It was still early, not quite eleven o'clock. Was something wrong over at the Martin's? Perhaps someone had broken in and was holding the family at knife-point, or even gun-point. Maybe one of the Martins, in the midst of the attack, managed to turn on that back light as a signal. I could see a few interior lights on, but all was quiet otherwise. One attacker could be ransacking the house while another held the family captive. In such a situation, only the Martin's exterior lights, surreptitiously operated by an alert family member, could serve as a signal to the neighborhood.

I was terrified. A robbery in our neighborhood! Before midnight, yet. I had to do something. Immediately my mind went to the .38 revolver we kept in the night stand on Vic's side of the bed. I wondered whether I should have awakened him. No, no, he wouldn't believe me. He'd call me a fool and order me to bed. Order me to bed! Vic was much too trusting but I had an intuitive feel for things like this. As I crept into the bedroom for the gun, I reminded myself of the time I knew Vic had left one of the burners on following his standard Sunday morning breakfast creation. We were on our way to church when the realization hit me, and I made him turn around and take us back home. Sure enough, the burner was on and would have probably burnt down the house, given the length of sermons lately. Intuitive I was, and a far better shot than Vic anyway, so there was no reason to get him out of bed.

I stuffed the gun in one of my generous blue jean hip pockets and made my way out of the bedroom. This was a petite little gun, only a five-shot. In my haste to save the Martins, I didn't look for the speed loader, filled with an additional five bullets, so I had only the ammo in the gun. The flood light was still on, so the attackers must still have been in the Martin's house.

As I snuck across our adjoining backyards, I noticed nothing suspicious. These suburban thieves, I thought, getting more sophisticated all the time. Ransack a home and not draw a bit of



attention to yourselves, except for the ubiquitous porch light. The giveaway.

I covered the Martin's back porch without a noise. I could see faintly through their curtains. The TV set was tuned to the late news, channel four, of course, and I could make out two figures sitting together on the couch in front of the set. Everything looked all right. It was then I realized the cunning nature of the thieves I was up against.

They had convinced the Martins that the family would be spared if Herb and Babs sat quietly in front of the set, pretending to watch the news, while they went through the house in search of loot. No doubt one of the gunmen kept a weapon trained on the two frightened adults throughout the ordeal, to prevent them from phoning for help. This heinous individual was just out of my line of sight. But I knew the layout of the Martin house, and knew the gunman could be at almost any vantage point, given the fine exposure the living room had from the rest of the house.

I wondered whether I should retreat to my own house at this point and call the police. It must have been five minutes that I debated this with myself; I watched the sports and two commercials through the Martin's sheer drapery. But no, the thieves could turn nasty while I was gone, and tomorrow's newscast would be all about the murdered Martins and their neighbors who did nothing to help.

This last thought inspired me to action. I knocked on the sliding glass door. It didn't occur to me that my life would now be in danger from the gunmen — such was my eagerness to get inside and help my friends.

Barbara and Herb looked at each other on the couch. Yeah, they were frightened, all right. I wanted to say, "I got your signal," but that would tip off the thieves and endanger the family. I couldn't let them know I knew what was going on inside their precious home. But when the thieves made their appearance with the loot, preparing to exit the Martin's house, they'd be on the reckoning end of a snub-nosed Charter Arms, undercover special.

Babs came to the sliding glass door, unlocked it and let me in. She seemed surprised to see me and a little disoriented.

"Vicki, how are you? Is everything okay?"

"With me? Yeah, okay, I guess. I saw your light on and

thought I'd come over for a little visit."

Babs was in a nightcoat. She pulled the frayed pink polyester collar tightly around her neck. She shot a confused look across the room to Herb, who was in casual pants, no shirt. He didn't seem to want me there, neither did, in fact. This only served to confirm my suspicions, because I knew the Martins to be universally hospitable. They were probably trying to signal me to leave, not wanting to entangle my life and safety with their personal tragedy. Like I said, such neighbors are hard to find, wanting only to quietly endure this robbery without bothering the Cominskys.

"So, Jennifer is in third grade next fall," I said, trying to buy time until the burglars made their appearance, no doubt bloated with goods gleaned from the well-to-do Martins.

"Ah, yes, yes, third it is," said Babs uncomfortably. If only I could tell her the porch light worked as the signal she (or Herb) had intended. She motioned for me to have a seat on the recliner which had been reupholstered to match the overly-expensive sectional couch.

"How's work, Herb? Pre-cast concrete doing as good as ever?"

"Yeah, just great, better than ever." A man of few words in the face of danger, I thought.

There wasn't much to talk about. I supposed the Martins were preoccupied with worry over what could happen to their children and what sort of things the thieves would take. It was in this nervous silence that reality hit me.

There had to be at least two thieves in the house to ensure the docile cooperation of the Martins. I had assumed this earlier without stopping to think they would both be armed, most likely. Now I am a good shot, but two against one? Even if I successfully survived a shoot-out with the thugs, chances were good they'd get off one or two shots at the least, possibly wounding or, God forbid, killing one of the Martins.

It was then the wisdom of the Martin's action hit me. Most neighbors, disturbed by the flood light, would simply have called to complain. Of course the thieves, not wanting to create suspicion, would probably have let Herb answer the phone and he would then signal for help. The alerted neighbor would have notified the police, and all would be well.

But I had figured it out. I had outsmarted myself. Now here I sat, endangering myself and my friends. My presence could

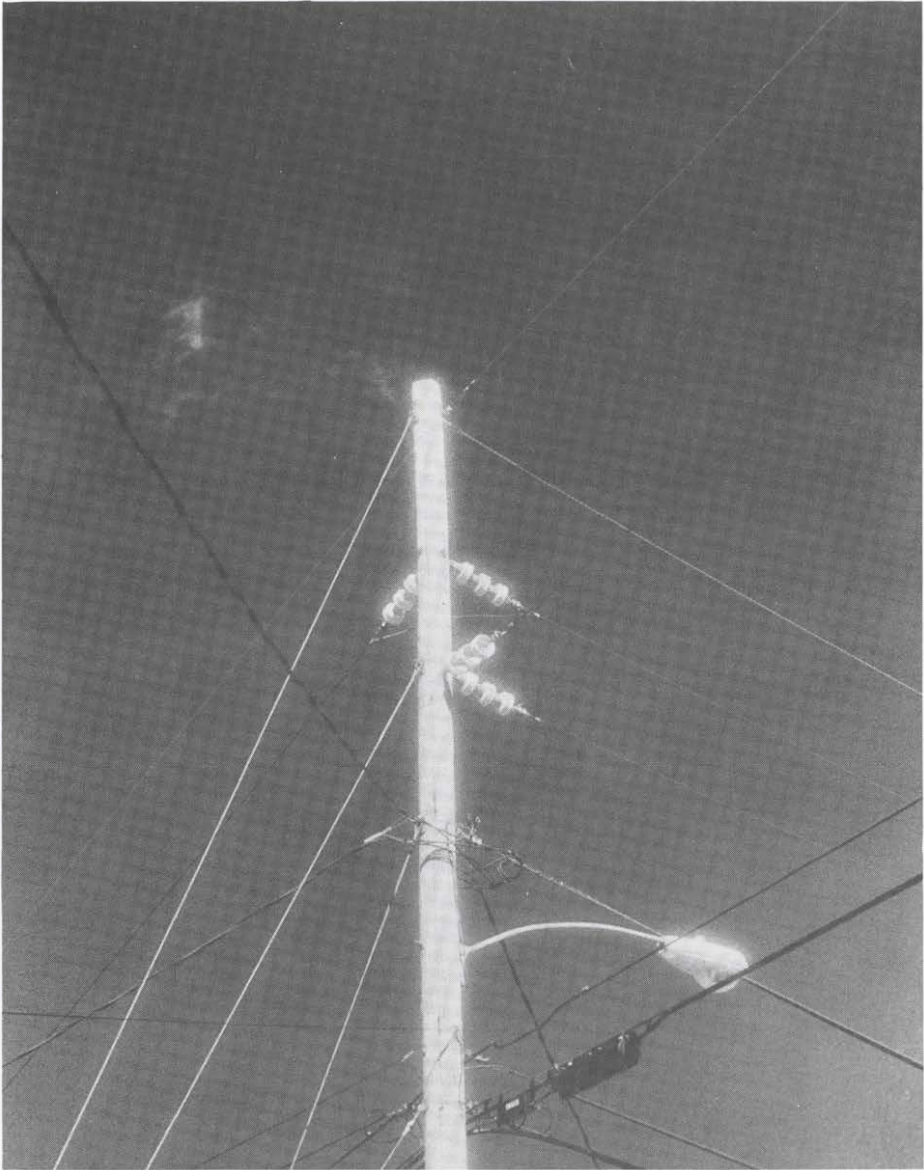


anger the thieves who might take out their displeasure on us with violence.

But the thieves apparently hadn't seen me. At least, I had not seen or heard them. I was free to make my way back home and call for help.

This reasoning took only a few seconds, then I jumped up and dashed for the door, speaking over my shoulder in a hushed voice. "Don't you guys worry, everything will be okay."

I ran home, trying to remember the Martin's exact address to tell the police.



*Power Surge.* Photograph, Mark E. Grisham.

# Kathleen O'Brien

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## *The Anguish of Flames*

*Dedicated to my wounded hero*

QUINN STREET . . .  
I ran it, incensed  
by your strength.  
Weathered tenements  
and blue-gray grandmothers  
watched  
long, skinny legs:  
Rat-poisoned alleys  
and black cellars, gravel  
quarries, candy-striped  
parks, truck yards  
and magnolia-blessed  
churchyards  
paid homage  
to my growing  
sneakers.  
I claimed all  
Bridgeport  
my own.  
King of the Mountain  
for my father's daughter!  
Nevermind that Spring would turn  
my magic domain  
into the gas station parking lot  
and someday  
boys would run faster.

-2-

Home. Safe harbor  
for this unmaidenly Viking,

proclaimed handsomely  
by the carcass-filled reefers  
you drove by moonlight  
every second and third day.  
Your sweat and beer smelling  
almost  
as sustaining as dinner.  
I had no tales to offer —  
only hugs;  
you knew  
all the stories anyway,  
years ago,  
when you threw me (age three)  
off the raft  
and said, "Swim."  
You knew (then)  
what you wanted  
of me.

-3-

On the Holy Day  
of First Communions  
veils abandoned early  
giggles echoed 'round the block  
dove-white dresses and lacey  
anklets graced Squad #8  
called to duty  
from the hot beef, tapped kegs  
and sponge cake of a rotting  
back porch. On Quinn Street  
nothing was too good  
for my father's  
daughter.

-4-

"Big Daddy Jack"  
uniformed in blue that reeked



of screaming children, hungry  
flames. Coming home late  
in the morning,  
your eyes  
relieving themselves  
of terror:  
far beyond  
good  
clean  
dirt . . .  
far beyond exhaustion.

I learned early  
how to judge  
for real  
heroes.

-5-

I watched your family  
and your belly  
swell, demand  
new dreams: a change of heart.  
Your house leaned  
towards the suburbs;  
your thirst tore us apart  
and one of us forgot  
which path you worked  
so hard to set me on  
and soon I learned you didn't  
really care as long as I  
kept my hair  
out of my eyes,  
stood up straight  
and didn't cry,  
studied hard enough  
to not outsmart the high  
school guys  
brought home to you while I  
became

a . . . goddess? nymph? or heroine?  
 or maybe just a woman . . .  
 But mostly you just pushed  
 for sexy  
 and made no small thing  
 of me not quite  
 filling my mother's  
 brassieres.

For you?  
 My father's daughter  
 never made it  
 as his kind of  
 woman.

-6-

Look at me, Daddy Jack!  
 I'm sixteen  
 and you're not so slick  
 anymore.  
 Hard work has claimed your back  
 and your guts  
 and your soul.

(I no longer look around  
 at 9:00 Mass for a renegade  
 fireman requesting  
 another week's  
 insurance.)

We meet to spar over the news  
 and I howl  
 inside, "How can a hero  
 have become such a pig?"  
 Glass of gin an hourly broadcast  
 of its own, I leave  
 to nurse a private binge:  
 two parts my tears, one part  
 yours, stirred,  
 chilled  
 and savoured (bittersweet)

while I longed for heroes  
and wished that boys  
were men.

-7-

Oh, Daddy Jack,  
I'm a woman now,  
and the father of my child  
is not like you. He  
has neither white horse  
nor red truck, no smokey uniforms,  
no tatoos. But  
he's a big man, too,  
and I wonder why his  
kind magic  
didn't rekindle . . .  
Wondered, that is,  
until . . .

-8-

"Hey look! An accident!  
Jesus Christ, STOP THE CAR!"

Backwards on the highway,  
running  
    ever  
        so

slowly . . .

Carrying the anguish of flames  
like cement blocks on our feet.  
The terror of waiting.  
Knowing Death is watching, playing  
this reel in s l o w motion.  
Down,  
through the trees;  
Harry and I stop  
just short of a blazing

tomb.  
We circle, strain  
to see through the curtains of Hell.  
Dancing orange walls  
teasing us onward,  
they open so slightly  
and slam shut again  
and again  
fracturing our vision.

“Oh, my God!”  
(There’s somebody in there.)  
“HARRY!”  
(FUCK! We can’t make it in.)

And then the mocking flames part —  
stop their feasting  
just long enough  
to let *us* know  
who won.

-9-

Charred and eaten,  
sexless,  
faceless being  
captured in half pivot  
at the wheel. Hands raised  
pleading,  
black and palming the window  
for mercy.  
With smell a shriek of terror  
I see the unknowable moment  
met too soon.  
(I’m sorry.)



-10-

Police come first. So late.  
Far away from Harry and me,  
they just shout,  
"Get outta there — before it blows."  
And I can only think, "Eat shit,  
you guys!" This fire  
is drying my tears  
and I must call Big Jack,  
right now, at five a.m.  
— after too long a time —  
and whisper, "Daddy,  
I love you."



*Untitled.* Photograph, Lori Kirsbaum.

## *Truth and the Violin*

SOMETIMES I WONDER how I have survived these past four years. Today it seems worse than usual. Ms. Benedict is really on the war path. I can hear her screaming through the door, "Michael, Michael, Michael, why do you continue when you make mistakes?" She has said that ten times already and it's only five minutes into my son's violin lesson. "Stop, stop," she yells. "Michael, you're a smart boy. Even a dumb boy could do this better than you." I can't listen to this anymore. I move down the hall.

There are times, now, when I think I won't be able to sit here one more minute. The benches are hard as rock. The walls are stark, not a picture or a curtain or even graffiti anywhere. Aggravating these austere conditions is the dull persistence of music. The sound comes from all directions; you can't shut it out. Complete concertos, short passages, perfection and repeated mistakes, making me strain to decipher the sounds that are made by my son, straining to hear the reaction of Ms. Benedict.

Four years ago when my son auditioned to study at the conservatory, I would have given anything to be where I am now. You see, Michael was self-taught, only played by ear. I didn't think he stood a ghost of a chance. So, as I sat on the hard bench that rainy afternoon, I listened to the other children audition and tried to guess which child would beat out my son.

Now my listening has changed. Now, I would know talent like Michael's. Mrs. Tanaka, Michael's advisor here, actually gave me lessons in listening. It all seemed so important. "You have a very big task in front of you," she explained to me as if I was a child. "Your son is very gifted, a gift that someday will belong to the world. And it rests on your shoulders."

You can imagine what an honor it was for me, who had never



played or studied an instrument, to have my son accepted at the conservatory at the age of seven. It became my life. But things haven't quite worked out as expected. "Michael doesn't seem to have the concentration," Mrs. Tanaka explained in the condescending baby voice she reserves for the parents who are not musically literate. "His music has an insipid quality. I know I told you we felt he had the makings of a concert violinist, but there are some things you just can't predict. His future in music is limited. He just isn't a virtuoso. Maybe someday he'll be a concertmaster or play in a quartet or chamber ensemble, but that's it."

I hate to say this, I know how selfish it sounds, but it was as though she told me he had only six months to live. It took me quite awhile to overcome that shock, and now that I'm back to earth, this place looks different.

You just never know what you're getting yourself into. That first lesson I sat on the cold bench and tried to read a book. I must have read that one page ten times when this rather tall man with an undersized violin case appeared on the bench next to me. "My dear, don't read any further," he said in a Hungarian accent that sounded a lot like Zsa Zsa's. "The father dies in the end." I never did finish that book.

"I'm Bedrick Vash."

The name meant nothing to me, but I gathered it should have by the way he said it and the fact that he didn't bother to ask for my name.

"Americans don't know how to enjoy good music," he continued. "Why in Budapest, I played in wonderful quartets and chamber groups. People enjoyed playing with me. Here, I have to pay musicians to play with me. What do you play?" he asked.

"I'm sorry to say, nothing."

"All cultured women in Hungary at least play the piano." He seemed intent on insulting me. But I already felt inept around musicians and his rude manner somehow intrigued me. "How old do you think I am?" he asked out-of-the-blue.

"I can't guess that. I'm not good with age."

"Try, please, you can't insult me."

"Oh, maybe fifty-five."

"Ha, see, Americans age fast too. I'm seventy-three."

This impressed me. Aside from being a little bent over, which



at six feet didn't make that much difference, there was nothing to give his age away, mentally or physically.

As the weeks went on he became less abrasive and really quite charming. He was straight from an old movie: kissing my hand, bringing me calla lilies, calling me his "baby girl." Who could resist his charm? He talked mostly of music, but I was never bored. He'd tell me about great violin performances in a way that made me feel and hear every nuance. "Nobody gave a performance like Heifetz. He would stand perfectly still throughout his whole performance. The only muscles he used were the ones absolutely required to play the instrument. Then he'd look straight down the finger board so that the sound would enter both ears at the same time instead of his left ear first. Of course, the audience was not accustomed to seeing the violin played with so few motions, and soon the whole house was filled with people whose only muscles in use were the involuntary ones. And when the last note was played and the audience emerged from this frozen state, every muscle in their bodies seemed to be thrust into their applause: it was deafening. Heifetz always seemed embarrassed and would almost run off the stage."

I could almost hear the bravos and see the empty stage. Soon, I would wait for my evening visits with Bedrick. I could actually recognize his footsteps as he approached the top of the third flight of stairs.

I know that Bedrick may seem a bit different to some people, but I assure you he can charm most anyone. And believe me, most musicians can only charm you from the stage. Right now, I see two of, shall we say, the more typical specimens heading down the hall. It's the Rogets. What a pair! He's about five-six and she is at least six-four. They always play piano four-hands. She always plays the upper notes. So, with this height difference you can't see Mr. Roget at all. Their performances remind me of watching an Amazon with four hands, until the last note is played. Then Mrs. Roget raises her arms, wrists first, and Mr. Roget peaks slyly from beneath her arm, looking like a fretful child, or sometimes a page turner.

"Hi!" He always talks to me, but he doesn't seem to remember me from week to week. "This is my wife Mavis. We're professional musicians, both of us."

"Claude, I'm sure she knows that by now," Mavis says. "You talk to her every week."

"Sure I do. I remember. Her son plays the violin. He is really good for a six-year-old."

"He's eleven," I say.

"You know, there is a woman you must meet," he says. "She's your double, I mean it. Here, come with me."

I've got nothing better to do, so I let Roget lead me down the hall. He flings open a door, and the woman from behind the Steinway just about has a heart attack. And she's old enough to have one! God, she must be eighty! I'm only thirty-five. And we don't resemble each other at all.

"Look, Millie. I found this girl out in the hall. She looks just like you. Don't you think?" He looks pleased at this introduction.

"Oh, heavens, Claude. What a compliment," the woman says. "I suppose it's not much of a compliment for you though, is it dear?"

"Oh, I can see the resemblance." I have to lie.

"See, I told you," Roget says. Then he looks at me and at her and says, "No, no this isn't right. I've got the wrong people. You don't look alike at all."

The old woman and I smile uncomfortably, and excuse ourselves. Roget just seems to drift off to Mavis' side, apparently latching onto a new thought. What can I say? For four years I've put up with people like this.

I know you must think I am making a big thing over violin lessons, but you should know what this involves. For Michael it has been most of his life. He practices before school. Then he comes home at noon and practices until his lesson at 5:00. He hasn't even seen a TV show since *Sesame Street*, and he'd be hard pressed to name a recent sports hero. He's developed a huge scar on the left side of his neck, from hugging the violin. He looks pale. And I feel like I'm a nanny to a prince.

Thank God, Bedrick has really helped to comfort me as Michael has developed. Within three weeks he was helping me deal with my new role. He'd hold my hand and stroke my face and say, "You must breathe with your son when he plays. Watch him in the afternoons and make sure he is feeling the music. Close your eyes and really listen. Bring him up on Baroque and at puberty wean him to Beethoven."



Sure, he was eccentric, but I loved it. Even though I knew nothing about his background, it never seemed that important. I felt total confidence in what he told me. You must realize he was a very distinguished gentleman and I just didn't feel comfortable prying. At first, I thought he was teaching at the conservatory. Then I decided that he must be an advisor. When I felt suspicious of his reason for hanging around so much, I would remind myself how much I enjoyed his company. I surely didn't want to jeopardize our meetings.

He'd take me into a practice room and play the violin for me. Well, he never actually played, but what he did was better. He wouldn't even remove his gloves or take up the violin from the case. He'd just curl his left hand over the imaginary instrument and bow with the same imagination. Once he did the whole "Beethoven Violin Concerto," humming every note, concentrating so hard that his eyes displayed that nystagmic eye movement violinists develop while staring at their fingers so close to their face. The concerto was magnificent. And the cadenza was the best I've ever heard. I had dreams of watching Michael play like that.

It is hard for me to remember that Michael will never sound like that. Everyone expected so much from him — I did too. Bedrick said, "It's the expectations that stifle creativity the most. Let him form his own goals." That's what I became afraid of — Michael's expectations and goals.

I began to worry about this the day Michael said, "More than anything in the world, I just want to stay at school the whole day and eat lunch in the cafeteria with the kids and play soccer on a team." Can you imagine wanting that instead of performing in the great concert halls throughout the world? Of course, he is just a young boy. But even now that we all know his career is limited — it's too late to stop. How do you go back to a childhood?

Just when I was concerned about Michael's increasing dissatisfaction, Bedrick was gone for a whole week. I felt guilty, but I just had this urge to do some investigating into his past. One night I used the conservatory's library and traced his career. It was incredible! Before he was even twenty-one he had given solo performances with most of the major European orchestras. It was absolutely thrilling seeing my Bedrick in all those news-

papers. I felt ridiculous not guessing that he was once a great violinist.

Then, I ran across the big story in his life and I just couldn't believe it. At twenty-five he had a freak accident and lost two fingers from his left hand. How could I possibly not have noticed? I had known him for four years. I had touched his hands. I had watched him play the violin, or at least thought I had. As I read on, I felt less betrayed and more understanding realizing the courage he had. Before the bandages were even off he was practicing — his left hand bowing and his right hand fingering. He did a remarkable job, but not good enough to resume his solo career. However, he continued. He played and conducted, and even enjoyed quite a comeback performing and conducting Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" at the Venice Festival. Then he just gave it all up to teach. He came to the conservatory limited in teaching technique, of course. How could he teach technique with missing fingers? So, he became a consultant, sort of a professor emeritus.

I worried about how I would react to him the next time I saw him. I glanced down at his glove and realized how much I must have been infatuated with him because it was obvious. I felt uncomfortable, but it wasn't as bad as I expected. It was almost like he knew I had discovered his background.

"The pressures were great — with or without fingers. My whole life was playing the violin. It was best to give up my playing career, for now I can feel the music from inside. I didn't need the violin after all." For the first time his expression was not that of the distinguished professor. His expression resembled Michael's. Compliant.

"What about Michael? Could he survive without his violin? Oh, Bedrick, I'm afraid. He's so troubled lately."

"My poor baby girl. I shouldn't have left you alone so long. Michael can find peace in music, if he can take the pressure off himself. I will talk to him."

That talk changed Michael. I can't explain it, just a change.

Then Bedrick stopped coming all together, a good three months ago. I don't know how to find him. I worry about him so, but Michael says that he'll be back.

I wonder what crazy thing is happening now. I'll bet at least four violin teachers have run down the hall. There's always a lot of excitement around here, but rarely do you see someone



running. Something is happening in Michael's room. As I look in, all I can think of is some sort of demonic ritual. Michael is circled by a group of men rubbing their chins in thought. He's playing the "Bruch Violin Concerto." Ms. Benedict breaks away from the crowd and joins me in the hall.

"He's ready," she says.

"Ready for what?"

"He's ready to make his debut with the Philharmonic."

"But you said he didn't have what it took to be a concert violinist."

"We had to put him at ease. You too, for that matter. And as soon as you lowered your expectations, he started playing the music from within."

Michael plays the last note and draws the bow high toward the ceiling. There is silence, then a bravo, cheers and smiles. Michael stares blankly. Sweat runs close to the corners of his eyes. His hair is wet. The scar redder than ever. His face seems puffy; he almost looks like a boxer after a fight. He's not happy. I refuse to discuss the idea of a debut with anyone until I can talk to Michael.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, but Michael is not going to play or discuss this anymore today," I announce. "Michael, pack up, we're leaving." We head down the hall.

In the car on the way home, Michael can only say, "It will be all right. I know how to take the pressure off."

I know I must talk to Bedrick before I can let Michael go back to the conservatory. I feel like they have all deceived me and Michael.

The next day over the phone the receptionist at the conservatory acts like she doesn't know Bedrick Vash. I hear her call to somebody in the background, "Hey, who's Vash? I've heard his name, but can't place him. Can you?"

I can barely hear the voice in the back, but I'm sure of what I hear.

"You know who he is, remember? That crack-pot who hangs around here. He was really quite a violinist once, then he just went crazy or something and cut off his fingers."

## *turning plows*

It calls for him  
these days,  
out of the distant fog  
that covers the fields.  
Half-stoned and slouched  
in his chair,  
he hears it  
cutting the land:  
weeds popping  
like broken beads.  
He imagines the smell  
of wet grass  
and the torn, brown earth  
that lies between  
then and now.  
There is  
the forked-tongue  
of the plow,  
the horse's steady  
plodding, the turned  
soil, the smothered  
past. They are  
all he wants.  
Though his feet  
seldom touch the earth  
they are stained,  
indelible,  
with loam and clay.  
He follows  
the straight plow  
now as he stands  
to dance,

his arms around her waist;  
they turn  
like the whirling earth.  
She takes the lead  
while he feels  
the broken land  
beneath his feet.

The worn leather straps  
call my father  
to follow.

# Jonathan Williams

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## *A Valediction for My Father (1898-1974)*

all the old things  
are gone now

and the people are  
different

Editors' Note: Jonathan Williams read  
his poems at the University of North  
Florida on April 15th, 1985.





